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ABSTRACT

In recent years, professional development for public school educators has come to be seen as a key component of school improvement plans, particularly large-scale systemic change programs. This Digest outlines what research and best practice suggest about effective professional development for elementary and secondary teachers working in restructured, learner-centered schools. It considers the implications of traditional school scheduling patterns for implementing effective professional development and shares some approaches that various schools and districts have taken to f..nding time for teacher development activities. An effective professional development program provides adequate time for teachers to acquire, practice, and reflect on new concepts and skills, as well as time to collaborate and interact with peers. In traditional school schedules, sufficient time for this kind of teacher activity is not normally integrated into the school day. Schools and school districts have devised several approaches and strategies to making time for teacher development available during school hours. Restructuring the school day or school year, as well as other approaches to incorporating teacher development into regular school schedules, may provoke opposition from parents, financial managers, and community interests. (IAH)

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MAKING TIME FOR TEACHER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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by

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Making Time for Teacher Professional Development

Ismat Abdal-Haqq

Does professional development for teachers have a place in school improvement?

For many years, teachers and other educators have used district-sponsored staff development or university course work to improve individual skills, qualify for salary increases, and meet certification requirements. Professional development rewarded educators with personal and professional growth, greater job security, and career advancement. Schools benefitted primarily at the classroom level through whatever added value the learning experience gave to an individual teacher's practice. However, in recent years we have seen growing appreciation for the potential impact of professional development on the overall school, not just individual classrooms.

Awareness of professional development's value in advancing school improvement is evident in several state and national reports, as well as in research reports on school restructuring initiatives. The 1994 National Education Commission on Time and Learning (NECTL) report, *Prisoners of Time*, indicates that what teachers are expected to know and do has increased in amount and complexity. A National Governors' Association report (Corcoran, 1995) notes that systemic reforms place many demands on teachers—improving subject-matter knowledge and pedagogical skills; understanding cultural and psychological factors that affect student learning; and assuming greater, and in some cases new, responsibilities for curriculum, assessment, outreach, governance, and interagency collaboration. In an Indiana Department of Education report, Bull, Buechler, Didley, and Krehbiel (1994) point out that meeting these demands may be particularly stressful for America's aging teaching force, which averages 14.5 teaching years. For the most part, these teachers received their training at a time when teaching did not routinely require many of the skills that are needed to function effectively in restructured schools. Redefinition of teacher work has led to reconceptualizing professional development and to increased regard for its role in many quarters, particularly when large-scale systemic reform initiatives are launched (Kentucky Education Association, 1993).

Teachers, researchers, and policymakers consistently indicate that the greatest challenge to implementing effective professional development is lack of time. Teachers need time to understand new concepts, learn new skills, develop new attitudes, research, discuss, reflect, assess, try new approaches and integrate them into their practice; and time to plan their own professional development (Cambone, 1995; Corcoran, 1995; Troen & Bolles, 1994; Watts & Castle, 1993). Cambone (1995) points out that teachers, as adult learners, need both set-aside time for learning (e.g., workshops and courses) and time to experience and digest new ideas and ways of working.

This Digest outlines what research and best practice tell us about effective professional development for teachers working in restructured, learner-centered schools. It considers the implications of traditional scheduling patterns for implementating effective professional development and shares some approaches that various schools and districts have taken to finding time for professional development.

What are some characteristics of effective professional development?

Effective professional development addresses the flaws of traditional approaches, which are often criticized for being fragmented, unproductive, inefficient, unrelated to practice, and lacking in intensity and follow-up (Bull et al., 1994; Corcoran, 1995; *Professional Development*, 1994). Effective professional development:

- is ongoing;
- includes training, practice, and feedback; opportunities for individual reflection and group inquiry into practice; and coaching or other follow-up procedures;
- is school-based and embedded in teacher work;
- is collaborative, providing opportunities for teachers to interact with peers;
- focuses on student learning, which should, in part, guide assessment of its effectiveness;
- encourages and supports school-based and teacher initiatives;
- is rooted in the knowledge base for teaching;
- incorporates constructivist approaches to teaching and learning;
- recognizes teachers as professionals and adult learners;
- provides adequate time and follow-up support; and
- is accessible and inclusive.

Do typical school schedules support effective professional development programs?

A major theme in *Prisoners of Time* (1994), the NECTL report, is that U. S. students and teachers are victims of inflexible and counterproductive school schedules. Professional development and collaboration generally must take place before or after school or in the summer, thus imposing on teachers' personal time; during planning or preparation periods, which cuts into time needed for other tasks; or on the limited number of staff development days. Teachers who sacrifice personal time or preparation time often experience burn-out from trying to fulfill competing demands for their time.

Professional development has not been widely seen as an intrinsic part of making teachers more adept and productive in the classroom (Watts & Castle, 1993); thus, school schedules do not normally incorporate time to consult or observe colleagues or engage in professional activities such as research, learning and practicing new skills, curriculum development, or professional reading. Typically, administrators, parents, and legislators view unfavorably anything that draws teachers away from direct engagement with students. Indeed, teachers themselves often feel guilty about being away from their classrooms for restructuring or staff development activities (Cambone, 1995; Raywid, 1993).

A number of researchers have contrasted this pattern with the approach found in foreign countries, particularly in

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China, Japan, and Germany where time for collegial interaction and collaboration are integrated into the school day (NECTL, 1994). For example, in many Asian schools, which generally have larger class sizes than U.S. schools, teachers teach fewer classes and spend 30-40% of their day out of the classroom, conferring with students and colleagues or engaged in other professional work. Donahoe (1993) suggests that such set-aside time is particularly important when significant school improvement plans are underway and advises states or school districts to formally establish "collective staff time," just as they set minimums for class time and teaching days.

How do schools and districts make more time for professional development?

In a study of regional and national innovative school groups, Raywid (1993) found three broad approaches to finding time for teachers to collaborate: (1) adding time by extending the school day or year, (2) extracting time from the existing schedule, and (3) altering staff utilization patterns. Given below are examples of the five types of time created for teacher development that Watts and Castle (1993) identified in a survey of schools involved in National Education Association initiatives.

Freed up time—using teaching assistants, college interns, parents, and administrators to cover classes; regularly scheduled early release days.

Restructured or rescheduled time—lengthening school day on four days, with early release on day five.

Better-used time—using regular staff or district meetings for planning and professional growth rather than for informational or administrative purposes.

Common time—scheduling common planning periods for colleagues having similar assignments.

Purchased time—establishing a substitute bank of 30-40 days per year, which teachers can tap when they participate in committee work or professional development activities.

Block scheduling can also make it easier to carve professional development time from the school day (Tanner, Canady, & Rettig, 1995). For example, Hackmann (1995) describes a middle school block schedule that frees one-fourth of the faculty to plan or engage in other professional work during each period of the day. At least one day a week, teachers in the Teaching and Learning Collaborative in Massachusetts have no teaching duties. They can use this Alternative Professional Time to pursue professional interests or alternative roles, such as writing curriculum, conducting research, supervising student teacher interns, or teaching college classes. This arrangement is facilitated by the presence of full-time teaching interns and team-teaching. (Troen & Bolles, 1994). Newer technologies, such as Internet and video conferencing, can give teachers access to instructional resources and collegial networks (*Professional Development*, 1994).

There may be opposition to some of the above mentioned strategies. Adding more pupil-free professional development days can be costly and may provoke opposition from financial managers or legislators. Cambone (1995) points out that schools do not exist in a vacuum, isolated from the larger community. Extending the school day and school year to accommodate more professional development time can upset parents' child care arrangements and family vacations. If schools remain open during the summer and teenagers are not free for summer jobs in places like amusement parks, the local economy can be affected and commercial interests may object to such a schedule change. School maintenance agendas, which often schedule big projects over the summer, may also be affected by extending the school year.

Perhaps the most formidable challenge to institutionalizing effective professional development time may be the prevailing school culture, which generally considers a teacher's proper place during school hours to be in front of a class and which isolates teachers from one another and discourages collaborative work (NECTL, 1994). It is a culture that does not place a premium on teacher learning and in which decisions about professional development needs are not usually made by teachers but by state, district, and building administrators. Paradoxically, implementing a more effective pattern of teacher professional development requires struggling against these constraints, but it may also help to create a school climate that is more hospitable to teacher learning.

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